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SUBJECT: PRESIDENT PRESIDES OVER NATIONAL DAY FESTIVITIES IN GOMA
WITH THEME THE EAST IS RETURNING TO NORMAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: President Kabila presided over well-executed and lavish Independence Day ceremonies in Goma on June 30. Charge and Goma emboff attended ceremonies on behalf of the USG. Observers were impressed by a parade of smart-stepping soldiers, well-equipped police, and a wide array of civic organizations, involving an estimated 5,000 participants and including representatives of the CNDP, until recently a rebel fighting force. The cost of the event, including cash payments to all troops, transporting thousands of persons from Kinshasa, as well as new uniforms and boots for all security personnel, could be as high as \$1 million. Many projects to upgrade Goma's infrastructure remain unfinished, but the city and security forces demonstrated an unsuspected capacity for discipline on June 30. Curiously, the president was received with tepid applause and did not speak. The governor of North Kivu, who did speak, emphasized his firm allegiance to the president and his policies. Kabila, who was scheduled to attend the opening of an agricultural fair in Goma after the parade, did not make that event.

The point of holding the national day event in Goma was to show the country and the world that war-torn eastern Congo is back in business. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On the eve of Congolese independence, few observers expected the June 30 Independence Day celebrations in Goma to go smoothly. The town had been a dusty construction site for weeks in preparation for President Kabila's arrival on June 30, but many projects were still unfinished. Potholes were dug out, but never filled in, advancing Goma's reputation for the worst roads in the world. Some buildings and curbs received only a partial coat of paint. MONUC sources reported growing complaints from local authorities as they struggled to meet deadlines. New sodium streetlights were installed, but remained unlit. But on June 29th the lights went on in Goma.

Uncanny organization in Goma

¶3. (SBU) But not only were the lights switched on, the June 30 ceremonies went off without a hitch. Kabila kicked off the celebration with a stroll down the central parade route, Goma's widest boulevard, receiving polite but tepid applause. Immediately following the president's inspection of the troops, North Kivu governor Julien Paluku Kahongya read a short (by Congolese standards) speech, calling on all Congolese to avoid a "somaliazation" of the country and welcoming recent developments furthering the peace process, including the joint Rwandan-Congolese military operation against the FDLR. Paluku, whose political future as governor is in doubt, due in part to the rapprochement between the DRC and Rwanda, clearly wished to portray himself as the president's ally, naming Kabila an "honorary citizen of North Kivu." In a departure from previous Congolese National Day ceremonies, Kabila did not speak nor did he mingle with the crowds, a trademark of Joseph-Desire Mobutu's long tenure as head of state.

¶4. (SBU) Against all expectations, a tightly-packed program came

off almost flawlessly, as the two and a half hour parade started late but finished on schedule, demonstrating Goma's previously unknown capacity for organization. Military troops, usually known for their unruly indiscipline, marched past the presidential podium in crisp formation with full regalia. Six T-55 tanks and polished personnel carriers were followed by a pair of howitzers and a pair of mobile rocket launchers. All units were represented, from the Presidential Guard, the infantry, Military Police, navy, coast guard with inflatable speedboats in tow, air force, K-9 units and several women's units (which drew the only cheer from the crowd). Two military bands with new-looking instruments alternated to provide a musical backdrop for the entire parade, while the DRC's top military brass and government officials observed from the front row. (Note: Former CNDP chief of staff Bosco Ntaganda was not seen. End note.)

¶5. (SBU) The police provided one of the more impressive displays. Hundreds of officers representing SWAT units, crowd control units, canine units, chemical response units, quick reaction forces, and regular police high-stepped past the president in full gear that looked as if it had never been used. Off the parade pitch, security was also impressive, with no-nonsense republican guard troops augmenting regular police in crisp new uniforms and metal detectors.

(Note: Sources in Kinshasa told us that all military and police participants in the parade were paid last week, ending months of arrears in receiving salary payments and guaranteeing loyalty during the president's visit. Troops and police were also issued new uniforms and boots. Together with the transportation costs in moving thousands of persons from Kinshasa to Goma for this event, some observers believe the Government spent \$1 million or more to hold National Day festivities in Goma. End note.)

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Everyone is represented

¶6. (SBU) Almost every important social organization in Goma came out in brightly-colored dresses and suits. There were no floats, but all groups proudly carried large banners announcing their organization, many expressing support for the president. Women's groups, cultural dancers, local businesses, labor unions, professional associations (including bakers carrying loaves of bread) and other civic organizations were followed by Mai Mai groups, organizations of handicapped persons, gymnasts, rastafarians, veiled Muslim women, and a range of political parties, including the recently-demobilized CNDP. Even Goma's unique Tchukudou corps (porters who use a unique slanted two-wheel vehicle) turned out on six freshly painted wooden bicycles. A regatta of several new John Deere Tractors brought up the rear, ushering in the presentation of military honors to the president.

On to the fair

¶7. (SBU) The VIPs and hundreds of onlookers quickly decamped to the Agricultural Fair, some 45 minutes drive from central Goma, where Kabila was scheduled (but did not show up) to cut the ribbon to formally open the exhibition. VIPs were quickly fed (although most tables did not have cutlery or glasses), and ambassadors then shuttled back to the airport to catch the MONUC-provided flights before darkness. Local residents continued to pour into the fairgrounds, where they were treated to an impressive show by Congolese musical stars Papa Wemba and Adolf. Farmers showed off their prize livestock and several well-constructed halls were filled with information booths and exhibitions. The MONUC booth, where a senior political advisor answered questions about MONUC's mission, was especially popular. Wrapping up the day's events: an impressive fireworks display, the first that many local residents had ever seen. A similar display in the city itself caused a brief panic. More accustomed to the sound of guns than fireworks, many Goma residents initially thought shooting had erupted in town.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: National Day 2009 was tailor-made for political rhetoric. Goma is booming, with huge houses going up on every vacant lot. In short, there is a return to some degree of normalcy in Goma, the real message Kabila and his government wanted to send.

The event was also significant for what it said about what the DRC can do: discipline and civic pride are possible in the Congo, provided money and motivation are present. But many who witnessed the military display were left wondering why a fine looking army doesn't fight, and why well-equipped police can't stop prison breaks and rampant rape. The answer, of course, is that the troops on display were select units, not the recently-integrated brigades responsible for so many crimes during deployment. In the end, while Goma booms, other parts of North and South Kivu remain mired in a low-level conflict and Operation Kimia II has been lackluster at best. The war in the east is not really over. End comment.

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